

## PARSING CHINESE-RUSSIAN MILITARY EXERCISES

Richard Weitz

China and Russia continue to develop their defense partnership to encompass a wide range of activities, including arms sales and joint military exercises. Their governments share certain security concerns (maintaining Eurasian stability, managing border security, and balancing the United States and its allies) and do not perceive each other as near-term military threats. Russia has been unable to develop a robust defense relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or other potential allies beyond some of the former Soviet republics, leaving China as its most important non-Commonwealth of Independent States military partner. In recent years, China has become more eager to pursue defense diplomacy with the United States and other countries, but Russia remains its main foreign arms supplier and defense exercise collaborator. Chinese and Russian officials, including their presidents, have advocated strengthening their military partnership still further, though both governments credibly deny any intent to establish a genuine mutual defense alliance such as the one that the United States has with Japan, South Korea, and its NATO allies.

During the past decade, the Chinese and Russian armed forces have engaged in many small, and several large, joint exercises, sometimes involving their Central Asian partners within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The most comprehensive military drills are those in the “Peace Mission” series, which are primarily air-ground exercises that used to take place every other year, but now

typically occur annually. Since 2012, China and Russia have also held annual joint naval exercises, which encompass reciprocal port visits, personnel exchanges, and extensive Russian naval weapons sales to China. The two countries conducted joint naval maneuvers before 2012, but only as a maritime component of the “Peace Mission” exercises. However, the three most recent maritime drills took place independent of the SCO, a trend that will likely continue.

These Chinese and Russian joint and multilateral exercises have several purposes. First, they are designed to improve the operational proficiency of the participating militaries and increase their interoperability. Second, Chinese and Russian representatives have cited the advantages of collaborating with foreign armed forces to learn new tactics, techniques, and procedures. In particular, these drills enhance the ability of both militaries to deter and suppress regional terrorism and mass popular unrest, such as the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the Uzbekistani city of Andijan in 2005. Engaging in major multinational military exercises is especially important for the PLA, which has not fought an active war in decades. Third, the drills affirm China’s and Russia’s commitment to military cooperation as an important dimension of their evolving relationship despite their lack of a formal defense alliance. Fourth, these exercises help the two militaries learn more about each other’s evolving military capabilities and promote confidence building between them. Finally, Chinese and Russian authors – whose countries share a good, but not espe-

cially close or extensive, relationship—describe these drills as promoting bilateral trust and reassurance and supporting the broader goals of the SCO.

Thus far, these exercises have not established a solid basis for joint Chinese-Russian military operations, even in Eurasia. The drills do not rehearse integrated military operations to the same degree as, for instance, the U.S. Army does with its European or Asian military allies. At best, the Chinese and Russian armed forces can now better deconflict any parallel operations in a common military campaign such as might occur in a joint effort to suppress a major Islamist insurgency in a Central Asian country. Even so, these two countries' exercises continue to grow in scope, complexity, and integration. Consequently, the Chinese-Russian defense relationship has the potential to become one of the most significant international security developments, and so the partnership should be closely monitored by the U.S. Army and other U.S. government agencies.

\*\*\*\*\*

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute's homepage at [www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil](http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil).

\*\*\*\*\*

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at [SSI\\_Publishing@conus.army.mil](mailto:SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil). All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."



**This Publication**



**SSI Website**



**USAWC Website**